The Pact of Umar

As Islam expanded after Muhammad's death, many of the conquered lands were inhabited by Jews and Christians who, rather than convert to Islam, accepted second class status as *Dhimmis* (non-Muslims). This created a need for guidelines as to how the Muslims were to deal with non-believers, who remained the numerical majority in many subjugated areas for centuries.

The Pact of 'Umar (or Omar) is believed to have been an agreement between 'Umar, the second “Rightly Guided” Caliph, and the conquered Christians of Syria, circa 637. (Some historians date it to the later reign of Umar II (717–720)). Although Jews are not specifically mentioned in the Pact, it was nevertheless generally considered a model for how Muslims were to deal with both Jewish and Christian populations in conquered territories. Various versions of the Pact have survived. The text that follows is translated from the *Tafsir Ibn Kathir*, an influential 14th century commentary on the Qu'ran.

In the name of God, the Merciful and Compassionate. This is a letter to the servant of God Umar, Commander of the Faithful, from the Christians of Ash-Sham. When you came against us, we asked you for safe-conduct (aman) for ourselves, our descendants, our property, and the people of our community, and we undertook the following obligations toward you:

We shall not build, in our cities or in their neighborhood, new monasteries, churches, convents, or monks' cells, nor shall we repair, by day or by night, such of them as fall in ruins or are situated in the quarters of the Muslims.

We shall keep our gates wide open for passersby and travelers. We shall give board and lodging to all Muslims who pass our way for three days.

We shall not give shelter in our churches or in our dwellings to any spy, nor hide him from the Muslims.

We shall not teach the Qur'an to our children.

We shall not manifest our religion publicly nor convert anyone to it. We shall not prevent any of our kin from entering Islam if they wish it.

We shall show respect toward the Muslims, and we shall rise from our seats when they wish to sit.

We shall not seek to resemble the Muslims by imitating any of their garments, the qalansuwa, the turban, footwear, or the parting of the hair. We shall not speak as they do, nor shall we adopt their kunyas [i.e. names starting with Abu ("father") or Umm ("mother")].

We shall not mount on saddles, nor shall we gird swords nor bear any kind of arms nor carry them on our persons.

We shall not engrave Arabic inscriptions on our seals.

We shall not sell fermented drinks.

We shall clip the fronts of our heads.

We shall always dress in the same way wherever we may be, and we shall bind the zunar round our waists.

We shall not display our crosses or our books in the roads or markets of the Muslims. We shall use only clappers in our churches very softly. We shall not raise our voices when following our dead. We shall not show lights on any of the roads of the Muslims or in their markets. We shall not bury our dead near the Muslims.

We shall not take slaves who have been allotted to Muslims.

We shall not build houses taller than the houses of the Muslims.

(When I brought the letter to Umar, may God be pleased with him, he added, "We shall not strike a Muslim.")

We accept these conditions for ourselves and for the people of our community, and in return we receive safe-conduct.

If we in any way violate these undertakings for which we ourselves stand surety, we forfeit our covenant [dhimma], and we become liable to the penalties for contumacy and sedition.

Umar ibn al-Khittab replied: Sign what they ask, but add two clauses and impose them in addition to those which they have undertaken. They are: "They shall not buy anyone made prisoner by the Muslims," and "Whoever strikes a Muslim with deliberate intent shall forfeit the protection of this pact."

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